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TAGS: [FR](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH-HOSTED LEBANESE GATHERING MEETS LOW  
EXPECTATIONS

REF: BEIRUT 01047

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor Bruce Turner for reasons 1.4. (b), (d)

¶1. (U) The French-hosted "inter-Lebanese meeting" just outside Paris concluded the evening of July 15 with no dramatic breakthroughs and in accord with the modest expectations French officials had expressed in the days leading up to it. French FM Bernard Kouchner told a July 15 press conference that, notwithstanding tension on the first day, the parties had achieved a positive tone for discussions that he believed would carry the process of dialogue forward.

He said that French ambassador Emie would return to Beirut July 17, quickly followed by special envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran July 18 for further discussions with the various parties. Kouchner himself plans to fly to Beirut July 28 to lead another round of talks as, in his words, a "facilitator" of a Lebanese dialogue that, by rights, should occur in Lebanon.

¶2. (C) In the end, no communique followed the talks. It was not immediately clear whether a draft text had circulated as cited in reftel, but some press reports claimed the French had circulated some sort of document among the delegations to be signed. The newspaper "Le Figaro" cited an unnamed source at the Quai as claiming that the parties committed themselves to "a certain number of principles," notably focused on respecting Lebanese government institutions and the army, rejecting the involvement of foreign parties seeking to impose their will on Lebanon, ruling out any resort to violence, and affirming the necessity of restraint in public discourse. An Arab journalist who covered the meeting was unaware of any formal statement.

¶3. (SBU) While we await further details from our French interlocutors, we pass along the following additional points of note arising from this get-together:

--Kouchner, in his opening remarks, reportedly addressed explicitly the need to note and discuss critically Iran's interests in Lebanon, according to an Arab journalist who spoke to many of the Lebanese participants. Kouchner was less explicit in his reference to Syria, which he reportedly described as "another country in the region that was playing an unconstructive role in Lebanon." At his press conference, Kouchner, when asked whether Cousseran would visit Syria, replied that the GOF had as yet made no decision to send him and would only do so "if it served Lebanon's interests."

--While at the MFA chateau where the talks occurred,

delegates were not allowed to use cellphones or other devices to maintain contact with the outside world. The rationale behind this was to prevent anyone from trading invectives via the media and to minimize the potential for "third parties" to influence the participants.

--The press conference highlighted Kouchner,s interest in the fate of the two Israeli soldiers, as he recounted in response to a question how he had raised the issue with the Hizballah representatives. Kouchner said he was reassured that the UN-led process to secure the soldiers, release was still underway, while he acknowledged Hizballah,s own insistence on Israel,s release of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners. When asked whether he believed the prisoners were still alive, Kouchner responded that he did, based on his discussions.

--Hizballah,s presence at this gathering aroused considerable press attention and some protest. The leader of the Hizballah delegation, Muhammad Fneish, used an interview in the center-right "Figaro" newspaper to complain about French President Sarkozy,s characterizations of Hizballah activities as terrorism and noted that MFA "clarification" had prevented a Hizballah boycott (his public praise for France,s "balanced" approach, however, contrasted with reports that Hizballah was unhappy about perceived French bias in favor of the Siniora government). A leading French Jewish organization, meanwhile, took out ads in major newspapers to point out that Hizballah was not welcome in France despite the group,s recognition that Hizballah,s presence was probably indispensable to the quest for a Lebanese political solution. Demonstrators made similar points in downtown Paris July 15, noting as well that

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Hizballah remained the only major armed militia in Lebanon.

14. (C) Comment: We expect a formal readout shortly from the MFA, but the initial indications are that this meeting achieved its modest objectives of relaunching a national political dialogue but no more. Kouchner was silent in terms of indicating how this "breaking of the ice" would translate into a durable resolution of the issues dividing government and opposition in Lebanon. Most diplomatic observers in Paris believe Sarkozy blessed Kouchner,s Lebanon initiative as a low-cost undertaking that would reflect well on France (and him) if it succeeded but from which he could easily distance himself if it actually made matters worse. We started to get indications July 13 that the conference would wrap up a day earlier than originally predicted, suggesting the French thought it best to get through these proceedings as quickly as possible and toss the ball back to the Lebanese home court.

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